



The Center for Gender in Organizations's (CGO) most recent research focuses on the possibilities and challenges of working with and across social identity differences in order to increase equity and effectiveness in organizations.¹ In particular, we explore how to support developing alliances and coalitions among different social identity groups to sustain and institutionalize organizational change efforts for equity, inclusion, and diversity. Disturbed by the trend that diversity change efforts are often thought of as a "nice thing to do" but inconsequential to effective business practices, we seek to present an alternative. Using a "complexity lens" to understand gender, which sees differences as simultaneous processes of identity and institutional practice,² our research has led us to new concepts, practices, and skills that we can use to effectively work with and across social differences.

CGO's unique contribution to a more nuanced understanding of culture change is its emphasis on identifying and encouraging change in the assumptions and mental models that are held both individually and collectively in organizations through a cycle of inquiry, experimentation, and reflection.

In this article, we offer three snapshots of this work. First, Evangelina Holvino focuses on the "big picture" by providing a frame for understanding the work on diversity in the last thirty years in the United States. Her goal is to offer a critique of and to contextualize diversity efforts in the U.S. in order to delineate areas that need further exploration if we want these efforts to lead to more successful organizational change. Bridgette Sheridan follows, providing new theoretical concepts and practices from CGO's recent research on working across differences. These concepts and practices point to new skills and frameworks, which promise new possibilities for diversity and change in organizations. Lastly, Gelaye Debebe uses data from her research on inter-organizational

relationships to expand on the concepts explored by CGO. Using a cross-cultural lens, she shares a methodology for analyzing barriers for working across differences, providing us with another take on the task of working with and across differences in order to achieve organizational change.

Diversity, Organizational Change, and Working with Differences: What Next?

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In the summer of 2003 I was invited to participate in a workshop in Ghana to share CGO's approach to gender and institutional change and its potential application in universities in Africa with gender representatives of six such universities. I was impressed with how the national policies that guarantee women's rights in many African nations provided a more supportive landscape for institutional change in higher education than the diminishing affirmative action policies in the U.S. The workshop participants generated a vision of an equitable, diverse, and inclusive university that was one of the most encompassing visions I've ever seen in my twenty-five years of diversity work. This vision was produced as part of an exercise in which we systematically brainstormed key elements of a higher education institution that included mission, student-staff-faculty relations, curriculum, physical safety, and representation of diverse groups across different hierarchical levels. This discussion reminded me that contrary to their common portrayal as "victims," women in Africa have much to teach women in the U.S. about the conditions of success needed to achieve institutional change.

This story highlights what I think is one of the biggest mistakes we make in diversity work: failing to pay attention to the context in which diversity work happens, and how that context shapes some of the opportunities as well as the dilemmas and challenges faced. Indeed, I argue that we must pay attention to the historical, socio-political, economic, cultural, and organizational context of any diversity effort we may be involved in. My experience in Ghana provided an opportunity to understand the two very different contexts that frame diversity work in the U.S. and in African coun-

tries. The vision that the African women constructed allowed me to think about what we might aspire to do in our context and the successes and the challenges that we face in the U.S. when we engage in diversity work.

Where Are We Coming From, or, What's Our Context?

My own history provides an example of context in the U.S. I came from Puerto Rico to the U.S. in the late 1970s and worked with a well-known consulting firm on affirmative action at AT&T, which was at that time under decree order to meet its affirmative action goals as a federal contractor. The civil rights movement gains of the 1960s meant that organizations had to set equal employment opportunity and affirmative action guidelines. Therefore, people needed to be educated on the meaning and implications of these laws. Company trainings focused on the meanings and implications of these laws for women and minorities, as well as how they needed to be understood as a group, recruited, and advanced.

In the mid 1980s, I grew tired of trainings that did not seem to change the dynamics of inequality in organizations: organizational cultures were not changing so that women and minorities had more opportunities, nor were women and minorities increasingly represented in top management. I moved on to complete my doctorate. Given my practical experience, I wanted to study what new models existed or could be developed that went beyond affirmative action policies and trainings that sought to “fix the women and people of color.” I had a hunch that the problems were systemic and that my knowledge of organizational development and change could be applied to this goal of a more equitable workplace. It was about this time that a group of colleagues began using the term “multicultural organizational development” to describe a more strategic approach to consulting to organizations in order to achieve systemic change for gender and racial equity.³

In 1990 I took a study leave out of the country. When I returned two years later, the concept of “diversity” had taken hold and organizations were experimenting with models of change beyond training that included making the business case, involving top management, and implementing programs like mentoring and leadership succession that could address some of the issues women and people of color were facing. Throughout the 1990s the concepts of “inclusion,” “diversity,” “multiculturalism,” “cultural skills development,” and “social oppression” became recognized as different approaches that could be used to define and address the same problems we had been talking about in the 1970s. While some claim that these have become important paradigms that differentiate the assumptions that underlie

how diversity work is implemented, I believe that there are more similarities than differences in what we do in this field.⁴

Let me describe a typical U.S. approach to working with diversity: an organization identifies a problem, for example, women are not making it to partner levels and are leaving the organization at much higher rates than men. A task force is formed, and it hires a consultant to collect data on the problem, analyze it, and make recommendations on a strategy for change. The recommendations usually involve: 1) conducting a series of workshops to share the data and educate others on “the problem;” 2) defining the business case for why it is important to retain and advance women; 3) designing and implementing policies to address some of the issues unearthed in the inquiry phase, like work-life balance; 4) designing and implementing programs such as mentoring and flextime; 5) comparing baseline data with improvements made on key indicators, e.g., increase in the percentage of women partners; and 6) disseminating the initiatives and, if “positive,” their results. In a nutshell, this is the successful process described by Douglas McCracken for Deloitte.⁵

What Have We Learned as a Community of Practice?

We have learned some important lessons from the successes and failures of programs like the one at Deloitte. While this is not an exhaustive list, I believe it reflects what many would say are key learnings from diversity work in the U.S.:

- Discrimination and inequities in organizations are more subtle than we have assumed. For example, Latinas represent less than 0.24% of directors on corporate boards today and earn 52 cents to the dollar compared with white men,⁶ but no one would dare say out loud that this is because Latinas are untalented. On the other hand, many organizations have no information on the experiences of Latinas, nor do they have the ability or interest to understand Latinas’ unique experiences. Nonetheless, their experiences may be helpful in understanding why Latinas leave organizations in such high numbers to become entrepreneurs.
- We now have a theory and practice that helps us understand that discrimination and inequities are embedded in the structures, procedures, formal and informal practices, mental models, and organizational cultures that sustain discrimination and inequality in apparently neutral systems and practices.⁷
- Discriminatory patterns are sustained at many levels: individually, by the internal feelings, attitudes, and behaviors of individuals; interpersonally, by how individuals behave toward each other one on one and in groups; organizationally, through the system-wide

processes, structures, and organizational culture; and at the societal level, through institutional and society-wide processes and structures.⁸

- These patterns require complex interventions that address these different levels of systems and the myriad ways in which discrimination and inequality are manifested throughout an organization, but always in processes that relate to and reinforce each other. For example, individual attitudes about who is a good leader are related to images of heroic leadership based on male attributes. These attitudes result in performance appraisal systems that use informal criteria such as “aggressiveness,” which result in pay systems that do not consider less valued, “non-heroic” skills such as team work or Spanish language proficiency.
- We have learned that it is good, but not sufficient, to make the business case for diversity. A recent comprehensive study on the effects of diversity on business performance suggests that the link between diversity and performance is more complex than the popular rhetoric suggests. For example, diversity in teams may simultaneously produce more conflict and employee turnover as well as more creativity and innovation. “Whether diversity has a positive or negative impact on performance may depend on several aspects of an organization’s strategy, culture, and HR practices.” The study’s authors conclude that “a more nuanced view of the business case” is needed.⁹ In our work at CGO we also find that there are many reasons why organizations justify the value of diversity, for example, to attract and secure the best talent, to enhance innovation and quality, to increase organizational learning, or to reflect their client base. But regardless of the business case rationale, diversity efforts need to be ready to face the irrational and unconscious fears that racism, sexism, and redressing inequality engender, plus the complexity of challenging the status quo and making successful organizational changes.¹⁰
- Lastly, we have learned that while many change programs like mentoring, flextime, and child/elder care can be shown to be helpful, no one program or combination of them is guaranteed to work in a particular organization. What makes for success seems to be a complex combination of factors, including leadership commitment, internal constituencies for change, pressure from outside, and a good business case. We still need to better understand the factors that make for successful change and how to diminish the forces that hinder such efforts.

What Are We Missing and What Next?

Despite these major learnings, we have to continue to work on those issues that remain puzzling and unresolved. I suggest that we need to pay more attention to the following:

1. *First, we must develop encompassing visions of equity, inclusion, and diversity that get translated into concrete organizational indicators to guide strategies for change.* In other words, we must address the question, “Change toward what?” It is well known in the social sciences that focusing on problems instead of moving toward energizing visions dampens energy and decreases the problem-solving ability of groups.¹¹ The example drawn from my work in Ghana taught me that we need sophisticated processes to generate more complex visions in order to provide clearer direction to diversity change efforts.

We need to move beyond prescriptions for general programs to more specific descriptions of successful processes of change through time that show concrete and positive outcomes.

2. *We need more experimentation and less “benchmarking.”* The process of benchmarking, by definition, presupposes that what worked in one organization will work in another. But if we believe that context makes all the difference, then benchmarking is based on the wrong assumption. In the end, benchmarking produces cookie-cutter solutions that cannot work in all contexts, and which preclude the experimentation, risk-taking, and tailoring that are needed to respond to the peculiarities of unique organizations. Instead, we need more creative and iterative cycles of experiments and organizational learning to move us forward. We also need to move beyond prescriptions for general programs to more specific descriptions of successful processes of change through time that show concrete and positive outcomes. This in turn will require more collaboration between different actors engaged in change for organizational equity, including academics and human resource managers, North and South partners, and profit and not-for-profit organization practitioners—many of whom are often unwilling to share data, let alone work collaboratively.

3. *We need better theory and practice to tackle some of the paradoxes that the discourse of diversity in this country has generated.* A “diversity industry” has been sustained within an increasingly conservative mood in this country, but in trying to accommodate to that political climate—something we must do if we

pay attention to context—we have also created dilemmas that need to be addressed. For example:

- At its best, the concept of diversity is based on the discriminatory effects that come to members of stigmatized groups because they belong to those groups. The concept is not based on individual differences, but rather group-level differences that provide advantages to some and disadvantages to others. But in the effort to include all persons in diversity efforts, even those who are privileged by their group membership, diversity has come to mean any kind of “difference.” In an increasingly conservative climate, individual differences are preferred to group-focused explanations of inequality.
- This takes us to identifying another challenge: we need to address the power of deeply-held beliefs such as individualism and meritocracy, which hinder understanding of the subtle and not-so-subtle dynamics that create inequality in organizations. By meritocracy, I mean the belief that talent and hard work is all that is required to advance in an organization. It is difficult to convince others that “she did not make it” because of gender and racial discrimination when the prevalent assumptions are that “organizations are neutral, not gendered,” “cream rises to the top,” “you have to pay your dues,” and “if you can’t hack it you are not good for us anyway.”

4. *We need a more nuanced understanding of organizational change, and a new skills set that is based on this deeper understanding.* For example, we need to look more closely at the interaction between top-down and bottom-up initiatives in conjunction with pressure from outside groups and social movements, and how such collaborations between different organizational actors occur that support successful institutional change. In addition, a more honest analysis of failures would help us much more than cases of limited success, which are then touted as benchmarks. I am particularly interested in expanding our ability to enact culture change. Culture change is not achieved with a series of workshops or a collection of programs; changing processes or structures and educating people is not culture change. CGO’s unique contribution to a more nuanced understanding of culture change is its emphasis on identifying and encouraging change in the assumptions and mental models that are held both individually and collectively in organizations through a cycle of inquiry, experimentation, and reflection.

5. *Finally, we need a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of differences and identity.* There are three major types of differences: social, cultural, and cognitive-functional. By *social differences* we mean those derived from membership in identity

groups, such as race, gender, and sexual identity. By *cultural differences*, we mean differences derived from diverse national, ethnic, or cultural groups. By *functional differences* we mean differences in task-related knowledge, skills, and experiences, and by *cognitive differences* we mean differences in styles for accessing and processing information.¹² If we can understand that differences operate in many dimensions and that they interact with each other, then we can explore how the identities we hold are always causing connections and disconnections with others both like us and different from us. We need to learn much more about how the complexity of these interactions plays out without privileging one dimension of difference over another.

Conclusion

I have presented a picture of diversity in the year 2003. It is a picture grounded in the historical and sociopolitical reality of the U.S., which creates its own opportunities, challenges, and definitions of the problems and solutions we pursue. I have suggested some directions for taking our theory and practice deeper and further into the 21st century. But, as my colleague Faith Gabelnick has said, “it is in the exquisite attention to small acts, which might not even work, that experimentation and real changes in organizational culture happen.”¹³ One of those small, but very significant, acts is the building of partnerships, alliances, coalitions, and collaborations among different groups and identities to support organizational change for equity; this is also one of diversity’s greatest challenges. Next, Bridgette Sheridan addresses the theory and practice that CGO has developed over the last several years in order to help individuals and groups work with and across gender, race, sexual, class, national and other social differences to support organizational change.

Practices, Simultaneity, and Stance: Three Concepts for Working Across Differences

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While the task of working across differences may be somewhat easy to envision, it is not so easy to enact in the practice of organizational life. In a world that equates difference with destructive conflict, it can be difficult to sustain efforts to work with, through, and across differences. Instead, differences are often covered over while similarities are overstated as a means to avoid conflict and therefore to supposedly preserve relationships. The cultural assumption that we work together best when we focus on our similarities rather than our differences often gets in the way of being able to work across individual, group, and organizational differences. We have learned that, though working across identity differences may seem to have little to do with organization-

al goals, unless we can name and grapple with these differences, they will emerge in subtle ways that hinder effectiveness. One of CGO's major insights in this area is the need to find better ways to challenge the assumption that similarities are the only possible or preferred way of connecting with others.

What is so difficult about confronting and working with difference? Why is it that, so often, dominant groups want to emphasize similarities rather than mine the richness of differences between themselves and other less privileged groups? All kinds of fears and myths related to difference erode the potential for productive alliances. Colleagues of different identities often avoid confrontation with one another for fear of being accused of racism, sexism, or homophobia. These individual dynamics are exacerbated in groups. For example, when African American women are asked to join an organization's women's group, they may fear that they will be used for the "white women's group's" purpose.

Why is it that, so often, dominant groups want to emphasize similarities rather than mine the richness of differences between themselves and other less privileged groups?

Given these challenges, how do we work across social identity differences in organizations in order to promote organizational learning and culture change for equity and productivity? Our philosophy at CGO is that the most fruitful organizational learning happens at the intersection of theory and practice. That is, our ideas and theories stem from learning about what individuals and groups are actually doing in organizational life. It is through analyzing experiments—both successes and failures—that we have learned the most about working with and across differences. In the model and the examples that I share here, I aim to show how CGO's approach offers organizational change agents the best of both theory and practice. Here I outline three concepts—simultaneity, stance, and practices—we have identified in our research for successfully working with social identity differences in order to promote connection, and therefore the possibility of concerted efforts for deep systemic change within organizations.

Simultaneity

Simultaneity involves recognizing that individuals hold multiple identities, and that these identities are fluid.¹⁴ When we think about building alliances for organizational change, the

concept of simultaneity is particularly useful. By recognizing simultaneity, we open up the possibility of building alliances that go beyond one narrowly defined identity by creating cross-bridging identities to pursue specific change goals. For example, in an organization we work with, Hispanics from a variety of nationalities are coming together under a newly accepted "Latino" identity to try to increase their opportunities for advancement and recognition in their organization. At the same time, while Latino men and women may work together for this initiative, Latinas might also want to join with other women of color to support programs for, say, child and elder care. Finally, there are other situations where embracing a specific identity such as "Chicana" or "Afro Cuban" or "gay" helps individuals or groups more readily achieve their goals. Holding this concept of simultaneity allows us to mine the differences within ourselves and between one another in ways that help rather than hinder organizational goals.

Stance

The second concept is what we call a *stance of inquiry and disclosure*. By stance we mean the way in which a person presents herself to others and how she takes in experiences and information from others. We have found that there is an assumption that members of privileged groups will inquire, while members of subordinate groups are expected to disclose. In order to successfully work with differences, it is important for both parties to agree to inquire *and* to disclose. This stance involves being open to learning, inquiring, and being moved by others, while at the same time disclosing what is absolutely necessary for an alliance to support your own values, beliefs, and goals.

What stance a person takes is very much influenced by their organizational role—manager, consultant, peer, friend—and the context in which the alliance is occurring—interpersonal, group, organizational, or societal. For example, imagine three colleagues at work—a white lesbian, a Latino gay man, and an African American straight woman—sharing stories about the challenges of balancing work and family life over lunch. Yet in the context of a meeting with senior management, the positions these colleagues take and the priorities they are willing to work for may be quite different. Perhaps gay men and lesbians would prioritize domestic partnership benefits, since their families pay such high costs by not having access to partner and family benefits. Perhaps both men and women of color would prioritize advancement and representation over work-life balance issues, since their numbers and opportunities in organizations are still so far behind those of white men and women. At the same time, it may be difficult for gay people to disclose their identity for fear of retribution. It may also be difficult for someone who is, say,

a person of color, gay, and female, to prioritize one identity category over another. It is because of this complexity that I provide the following examples of specific practices that support working across differences. We use the term *practices* in order to capture the notion of processes and actions that involve *reflecting* and *doing*, thus highlighting the importance of both theory (reflecting) and practice (enacting and doing) when working across differences.

Practices

In CGO's briefing note "Working Across Differences: Diversity Practices for Organizational Change," we share a vignette about a company, Alticorp (a pseudonym), that revamps its benefits packages in response to issues raised by the gay and lesbian caucus. The caucus worked with other employees to demonstrate how the company's benefits package not only ignored the needs of gay and lesbian workers, but also did not address the needs of many others who did not fit the "traditional" family model. By broadening their constituency and by working across their differences, the gay and lesbian caucus achieved a new, and now shared, goal: a benefits package that supported the needs of the majority of employees. Further, by building this connection with the broader community, the caucus was able to raise several other needs and challenges of gays and lesbians in an organization where the culture and practices are based on heterosexual norms.¹⁵

This vignette highlights two key practices that change agents—in this case the gay and lesbian caucus group and the HR department—enacted in order to bring about change. First, it illustrates the importance of *building interdependence*. The change agents at Alticorp built interdependence between themselves and others by making the case for domestic partner benefits and then asking others to respond from their own standpoints as to whether and how these benefits might be useful to them. This is different from what happens in traditional negotiations, where each group focuses on their own needs and desires and defines success as the ability to independently negotiate for the needs of one's own group, without being influenced by others. What we call relational interdependence is established when groups enter a negotiation or conversation open to hearing and learning from one another. Sharing narratives or stories helps foster the idea that their fates are actually interconnected with one another. Indeed, as is illustrated in this vignette, these kinds of stories—told from various standpoints—can lead over time to redefinitions of the problems and issues that bring people together in the first place.

Second, this vignette illustrates the practice of *working iteratively* when trying to work across differences for change. Working across differences is not a linear process with

beginning and end points. Rather, it requires participants to move between similarity and difference as the basis for alliance-building in organizations. These change agents were able to successfully move between focusing on the differences and the similarities between their group and other groups, who may benefit from a similar policy, if not for the same reasons.

But this vignette highlights a case in which change agents used concepts and practices to *successfully* work across differences. Another vignette, from CGO's organizational work, illustrates what Lani Guinier has called the "Failure Theory of Success," or how we can learn about working across differences by examining our missteps and mistakes.¹⁶

CGO was charged by a funder to convene eight international not-for-profit organizations.¹⁷ The goal of the project was to support initiatives for sustainability and change in each organization as well as to foster collective learning across organizations. As facilitators, the challenge for CGO was to create collaborative processes and structures by which the organizations could learn together and become more effective both separately and collectively. In a time of scarce resources, transition, and growth, it seemed reasonable to us to expect that all the organizations would want monetary, intellectual, and even emotional support for new change initiatives. But we learned that the idea of collaborating with each other and exposing their weaknesses as well as their strengths felt risky to them.

At the start of the project, CGO interviewed leaders from each of the organizations to assess their needs. We convened members of the eight organizations four times during the course of the project. The following is an example of how we were challenged by working with differences, which ultimately contributed to the difficulty of meeting one of the project's goals, collective learning across organizations.

In their first meeting, members agreed that working together on a joint project that focused on a theme of interest to all of the organizations—education—would benefit each organization by advancing their missions, attracting potential donors, and having a greater global impact. After interviewing each organization about their work, CGO prepared a summary report highlighting both the similarities and the differences in their approaches to education. The report was distributed in preparation for a meeting where they were to select an issue and plan a joint action as a group of influential and respected organizations in the field.

However, when they met to plan this joint action, the participants decided they did not want to use the summary report as a basis for their discussion. Instead, they met in their organizational cohorts to prepare mini-presentations on their

organization's current work on education. Each report focused on the successes, contributions, and future plans for education as an organization, as opposed to exploring where or how they could benefit from a collective project. While they did suggest concrete ideas for collective action, by the end of the meeting, all eight organizations agreed that it was not feasible for them to commit to an inter-organizational collaboration. Several reasons surfaced, including 1) a reluctance to commit to any project that would generate additional work, 2) each organization was already doing a lot on education and did not want to duplicate efforts or reinvent the wheel, and 3) many felt that it would be overambitious and premature to take on a common project as a loose network of organizations. In other words, a collective project was thought to be too much work and effort. It seemed more feasible to them to continue working individually on the issue, as they were unclear what they would gain from working as a group on a collective agenda.

The vignette illustrates what happens when the practice of *attending to group dynamics* is overlooked. Part of attending to these dynamics involves a skill that we call "asking difficult questions." CGO affiliate Karen Proudford explains this as a process that individuals or groups can use to invite others to grapple with basic assumptions that are generating conflict.¹⁸ In this case, CGO realized that in our effort to manage conflict, we avoided asking difficult questions. That is, we did not surface tensions between the individual organizations (for example, their different "politics" on education). These organizations knew of each other and many had worked together in different contexts for years, and thus they already had well-established networks and power dynamics between them that were difficult to disrupt. And we colluded with their suggestion to report out individually on their organization's work rather than probing each organization's approach to education, which may have raised differences between their approaches.

Ultimately, submerging these real and potential tensions got in the way of successfully working across differences. This became clear when the members decided against establishing a collective agenda even though they had previously agreed that they wanted to pursue one. Asking difficult questions like, "What might be some of the ideological differences that would make it hard for you to design a joint project?" or, "What are some of the strengths and weaknesses in your organization's current approach to education?" might have helped them work with those ideological differences and perhaps even establish some form of interdependence. This, in turn, may have promoted the possibility of imagining a collaborative project with outcomes that each organization could not have achieved working independently from one another.

But asking difficult questions involves taking risks. And what we have found is that, particularly for dominant groups, the risk is often too scary to take. As Evangelina Holvino has explained, "the skill of asking difficult questions refers to asking a question that is difficult for me to ask of the other, not that I think will be difficult for the other to answer. These are embarrassing questions; they show my ignorance; they require that we surface what is usually kept silenced; they make me feel vulnerable."¹⁹

At CGO, we believe that the concepts of simultaneity and stance, and practices such as building interdependence, working iteratively, and attending to group dynamics, can help organizations turn small change efforts into sustainable organizational change.

Consider the following example: a women's organization, committed to diversity and to culture change, held a retreat to address racial dynamics within their organization. One of the major questions that they addressed was, "Is this a white women's organization?" That is, were the norms and practices under which they operated based on norms associated with white, heterosexual, professional women? And if so, what does it mean for the women of color who are a part of the organization? For the white women? For lesbians? For women from working class backgrounds? For the quality and impact of their work? The retreat facilitator had them break into two groups: white women and women of color. One of their tasks was to generate questions that each group wanted to ask the other group. Questions the women of color asked included:

- What would facilitate conversation between us on an ongoing basis?
- Do you feel fear? If so, what is it about? What can we do?

When the white women came back to the large group, it turned out that they were unable to generate any questions. Why?

Mary McRae has spoken eloquently about why it is that black and white women have such a hard time working across racial differences. As she puts it,

If White women have internalized perceptions of themselves as weak, passive, and powerless, then it must

be difficult to identify with the power of White skin privilege. If Black women have internalized perceptions of themselves as strong, assertive, and nurturing, then it must be difficult to identify with a sense of powerlessness and vulnerability. It is also hard for Black women to perceive White women, who are stereotyped as weak, as actually being powerful and strong. Similarly it would be hard for White women to perceive Black women as . . . vulnerable.”²⁰

As the dominant discourse on race in the U.S. focuses on relationships between blacks and whites, often all other people of color and their experiences are interpreted through this paradigm, based on its very particular historical legacy of slavery in the U.S. For these, and many other reasons, then, it was difficult for the white women to take the step of asking difficult questions of their women-of-color colleagues. What if the women of color thought they were racist? How would they recover? Where would they be able to go from there?

And yet, as Karen Proudford found in her research with two groups, one almost exclusively white and the other black, asking difficult questions can help groups get “unstuck.”²¹ In her example, it was a white woman’s question—“How far down the path of understanding differences does one have to get before you start to understand sameness?”—that allowed both black and white women to think not only about their inter-group differences (relationship between the groups), but also about their intra-group differences (relationships between members of the same group). That is, along with talking about the differences between the black and white women, they were able to discuss how not all white women were interested in focusing only on gender and how not all black women wanted to focus only on race.

Conclusion

These are just a few examples of the “experiments” that we think are key to promoting learning and therefore successful connections across differences. At CGO, we believe that the concepts of simultaneity, stance, and practices such as building interdependence, working iteratively, and attending to group dynamics, can help organizations turn small change efforts into sustainable organizational change. Experimenting with these concepts promotes the possibility of building constituencies who are invested in the day-to-day practice of working across and with differences. Our hope is that the use of these concepts will help individuals and groups move from a stance where the politics of identity—meaning a solidarity based on sameness—is the only possible way to connect with others, to the politics of identification,²² where a shared vision or goal, uncovered

through inquiry into differences, becomes the basis for an alliance that brings positive change to many.

Below, Gelaye Debebe offers another take on working across differences by sharing a methodology that helps to reveal the barriers to forming multicultural coalitions. She examines data from her study of coordination in an inter-organizational relationship between a Navajo organization and an Anglo organization they had partnered with in part to consult on small business development issues.²³

Expanding on CGO’s Concepts for Working with Differences

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CGO has found that while a “small wins”²⁴ strategy may be useful for achieving short-term gains, unless a constituency group continues to advocate for change, this strategy is less effective for maintaining and institutionalizing change. Institutionalizing change requires sustained effort and focus from an organizational champion, and for change to take root, it needs to be embraced by a broad coalition. In the case of diversity efforts in organizations, this coalition needs to represent a broad spectrum of social identities. However, CGO’s experience suggests that forming and maintaining multicultural coalitions is difficult. Using this as a point of departure, one of my goals is to use a cross-cultural lens to consider some of the barriers to establishing and maintaining multicultural coalitions. This lens complements CGO’s social identity lens in that it allows us to explore and elaborate on the subtle clash of cultural and historical assumptions of members of different social identity groups, the practices used to handle such clashes, and the implications for building interdependence. My remarks on this issue relate to CGO’s notion of practices for working across differences. As another of my goals, I offer some reactions and thoughts on the concepts of simultaneity and stance of inquiry and disclosure.

Analyzing Near Misses to Uncover Cultural and Historical Barriers

As noted above, a significant, but overlooked, barrier to the formation of multicultural coalitions are *subtle intergroup conflict processes* that arise in everyday interactions. These subtle barriers manifest themselves in the power dynamics within organizations, cultural myths, and cultural differences. With respect to power dynamics, the interests of members of a multicultural coalition shift over time and across contexts. These shifts could, in turn, compromise the agenda for organizational equity. Cultural myths can also inhibit the effec-

tiveness of multicultural coalitions by preventing the giving and receiving of accurate feedback among members for fear of accusations of racism, sexism, or homophobia. The final barrier is cultural differences, or incompatible patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting on the part of potential members of the multicultural coalition. All three barriers are subtle and embedded in social practice—the everyday ways of thinking and acting in particular institutional contexts.

If we can appreciate and embrace the multiplicity of our own identities, then we can relate to and empathize with those we would otherwise consider to be different from us.

Using data from my study mentioned above, I will elaborate on how subtle intergroup conflict processes can play out in cross-cultural settings. Specifically, I will analyze near misses in cross-cultural interaction to shed light on the culture clashes that occur between individuals of different social identities. A *near miss* is a moment in conversation where individuals pick up on another person's perspective, but, in their response, they miss the other's intended point. A near miss can be a fleeting moment in a conversation, but its impact on the participants may not be. Often, people who experience a near miss feel frustrated that they were not heard or understood. Near misses also can have organizational implications. What people do in a particular interaction to deal with a near miss—the practices of working across difference—has implications for their abilities to build interdependence, and perhaps also for their abilities to work iteratively and to attend to group dynamics. Here, I focus on the practice of building interdependence.

One activity common in the workplace is conversation. In many cases, workplace conversation is initiated to solve particular problems. What follows is a brief segment illustrating a near miss in an interaction between “Tom,” a consultant from Development Training Associates (DTA), and “Cynthia,” a Navajo Membership Organization (NMO) representative. The conversation was initiated by Tom to discuss how to handle the problem of management of a bed-and-breakfast, the Canyon Inn, owned and operated by NMO.

Tom began by saying, “We need an ‘active manager,’” and gave an example of what he meant. He went on to say that the manager of the Canyon Inn should be someone who would greet people and arrange activities at the Inn such as talks for visitors. Tom told NMO that he thought visitors

might like talks on the basis of the feedback cards that they fill out at the end of their stay at the Canyon Inn. Cynthia responded that the trainers in the business division can handle coordinating talks, some of the tribe members themselves have been asked to give talks like that, and that the comment cards could be a very useful database.

This conversation features a near miss. Specifically, Tom lightly probed to elicit reactions regarding the idea of an active manager. Cynthia acknowledged the value of the visitor feedback cards but did not respond to—and seemed to have missed—Tom's main point, the issue of qualities of the active manager.

Many of us ignore such near misses by rationalizing that this kind of thing happens all the time, and it is simply not feasible to spend our time analyzing such incidents. But I argue that examining these near misses can reveal how history and culture come into play in interactions among culturally dissimilar individuals and possibly inhibit the formation of multicultural coalitions.²⁵

Tom and Cynthia did not explicitly indicate a recognition that a near miss had occurred. Nonetheless, the occurrence of the near miss created some discomfort for Tom, who said that NMO members did not understand the importance of having an active manager for the success of the bed-and-breakfast. When I dug deeper into the near miss in Tom and Cynthia's exchange, I found a number of different unexplored cultural assumptions. One of these concerns the purpose of a business such as the Canyon Inn. Noting the scarcity, even absence, of bed-and-breakfasts on the Navajo Nation, the large number of tourists that came through, and their tendency to find accommodations in border towns, Tom argued that the Canyon Inn had significant business potential. If this potential were seriously pursued by NMO, he reasoned, the Inn could be financially independent in a few years. This would free up NMO's financial contributions for other activities, and profits from the Inn could support new initiatives. He believed an active manager was necessary if the Inn were to be profitable.

NMO members, on the other hand, argued that the sole purpose of the Canyon Inn was to serve as a training tool in NMO's proposed hospitality program. Their concern was in providing community members with business skills that would enable them to make a living on the Navajo Nation, rather than having to seek jobs in border towns. In their view, by staying in their communities, young Navajos can remain connected to their cultural roots and be protected from the hostilities of the border towns. Hence Tom, coming from an Anglo economic and social reality, had an entirely different set of concerns than Cynthia, who lived in the

cultural, historical, and economic reality of the Navajo Nation.

Examining near misses also helps us unearth the socio-historical issues that come into play in an interaction between culturally diverse actors, such as in Tom and Cynthia's interaction described above. A concern underlying the NMO perspective around the purpose of business was NMO's goal of maintaining their culture. Although there were some individuals at NMO who, like Tom, felt that the Canyon Inn could serve a dual purpose of training and profit generation, some saw profit as inconsistent with national priorities, and therefore a threat to cultural maintenance. And, irrespective of feelings about the appropriateness of profit, all NMO organizational members I spoke to were primarily concerned with the issue of cultural maintenance. They explained that in the early 1960s, there was growing feeling among Navajo elders that policies of assimilation had wreaked havoc on the identity and self-confidence of Navajos, and these elders wanted to turn that situation around. NMO was established to prevent further cultural erosion and to affirm and transmit Navajo culture to the youth by providing training in a wide range of areas in ways that were consonant with the Navajo worldview. So any outside influence that threatened further cultural erosion was resisted, thereby perplexing outsiders such as Tom, who thought their expertise was sought.

Socio-historical issues can also impact the willingness of cross-cultural actors to work together. This has a direct bearing on how practices used to deal with near misses could impact the formation and maintenance of multicultural coalitions. The DTA representative, Tom, felt that Navajo-Anglo history was irrelevant to him personally. One day, in a fit of frustration, he said, "I can't do anything about what my ancestors did," indicating that he did not see a relationship between his ancestors' actions and his own. Some NMO organizational members felt differently; as one person pointed out, the outsider who is not aware of this history is prone to imposing his or her ideas. This act is likely to be seen by Navajos as historically continuous and earns the outsider the unfavorable label of being a "typical Anglo." But when it was clear that Tom's notion of active manager did not resonate with Cynthia, Tom did not make an effort to restate or further explain his idea. Instead, he turned to other issues. This response on his part allowed him to circumvent the expectation that he would act like a "typical Anglo" and may have allowed him to contribute to the building of interdependence between himself and his counterparts.

Simultaneity

Having illustrated the usefulness of the notion of practices in illuminating subtle socio-cultural and socio-historical

dynamics and their impact on the forming of multicultural coalitions for change, I want to briefly turn to the two concepts of simultaneity and stance, mentioned above by Bridgette Sheridan. I find the concept of simultaneity to be very promising as a way of thinking about the conditions necessary for building multicultural coalitions. It raises two broad areas of issues.

First, there is an assumption that is not stated but implicit in the concept of simultaneity: if we can appreciate and embrace the multiplicity of our own identities, then we can relate to and empathize with those we would otherwise consider to be different from us. Roosevelt Thomas makes a useful point, that none of us is solely in the position of being an outsider or an insider.²⁶ We all occupy these positions with respect to some aspect of our social identity in different contexts. For instance, we often speak of the white male as someone who occupies a dominant group position. Yet this conception is fixed and fails to take into account all the relevant aspects of this particular white man's identity or the context in which he is operating. When we account for these other aspects, his status appears less clear. If we were to assume the following dimensions of a hypothetical person's identity: white, male, homosexual, professional, and Catholic, it becomes clear that this individual is a member of both a dominant and subordinated group with respect to different dimensions of his identity, and that the position he holds depends on the context. Further, I am intrigued by the following question: what difference would it make, for the purpose of building multicultural coalitions, if this person were to embrace all the dimensions of his identity at all times? Would doing so allow him to "empathize" and connect to the problems of others he regards as different from him? Under what conditions will he be willing to embrace his whole self? Under what conditions will he be unable to do so? We can ask the same questions of people whom we traditionally think of as being members of a subordinated group, but who also carry dominant group identities.

Second, I want to explore how a multicultural identity is constructed as another way of talking about a stance of simultaneity. As I observed the members of DTA struggling with identity issues as they encountered differences, I wondered what impact, if any, this experience would have on how they saw themselves. DTA members described a lot of strong and negative feelings, and therefore sought to avoid their Navajo counterparts. Consequently, they developed strong intragroup bonds. Yet in the case of Tom, I observed that there was something else going on. He had strong negative reactions, but he was also willing and able to suspend some judgment. Did this have an impact on how he saw himself?

As indicated above, context matters. On Navajo land, DTA members were the outsiders. Were they aware of this? If so, how did they make sense of finding themselves in the outsider position when they were usually accustomed to being the insiders? In contrast, the NMO organizational members were insiders on Navajo land despite their outsider or subordinated status in society at large. Did they recognize their insider status? If so, what did it mean to find themselves in this position when they were accustomed to thinking of themselves as the outsider? In sum, the notion of simultaneity opens up a lot of questions about how we develop an identity that embraces our multiple selves and makes it more possible to work across our differences.

We hope that, by trying out new concepts, practices, and skills, change agents in work organizations will find that their diversity initiatives are not only a good thing to do, but that they are in fact necessary to make sustainable changes in organizational culture for equity and effectiveness.

Stance

There is a very interesting and important relationship between the notion of simultaneity and the notion of stance of inquiry and disclosure. The argument that Bridgette Sheridan has made, in essence, is that how we choose to present ourselves to others as well as how we take in and experience information from others has to do with the aspect of our multiple identities that is salient in a particular context. In the example that was provided above, men and women of color tend to prioritize advancement and representation over work-life balance concerns because the former is experienced as a more pressing issue for that group. What is the implication of this for building multicultural coalitions? For one, there is unintended competition for resources between diversity initiatives—work/life balance on the one hand and advancement and representation on the other—that can create tension and possibly weaken multicultural coalitions. Another outcome is that the reality of resource scarcity forces people to make win-lose choices from the perspective of their own interests. For instance, a woman of color would benefit as much from family-friendly workplace policies as would a white woman. But by aligning herself to the issue of advancement and representation, she precludes the possibility of supporting work/life balance initiatives.

There are two practical questions raised by these problems. First, how can multicultural coalitions find integrative solutions to the competing demands of its diverse members? And second, how can individuals embrace their multiple selves to advocate for policies that would create an equitable work environment for everyone?

In sum, I am excited about the learnings that have taken place at CGO over the past few years. As described above, CGO has crystallized concepts and practices for handling the subtle processes involved in working across difference. Through many discussions that we've had in a wide variety of forums, we have gained many important insights that have helped to refine these concepts and practices. Most importantly, the concepts and practices open the gateway for new questions and experimentation as we apply them to the opportunities and challenges brought by diversity in our workplaces and in our lives.

Conclusion

Is social and cultural diversity good for work organizations? There is certainly research that demonstrates the value of diversity in organizations.²⁷ Do we need new and better ways to engage in diversity initiatives? Absolutely. Working with, through, and across our differences is one way to help promote lasting organizational change. We encourage you to test CGO's concepts for working with differences and let us know if they help make your diversity initiatives more successful. We hope that, by trying out new concepts, practices, and skills, change agents in work organizations will find that their diversity initiatives are not only a good thing to do, but that they are in fact necessary to make sustainable changes in organizational culture for equity and effectiveness.

Endnotes

¹ This commentary was prepared by Bridgette Sheridan, Evangelina Holvino, and Gelaye Debebe. It is based on a panel presentation held November 4, 2003, as part of CGO's 2003-2004 event series, *Gender at Work: A BOLD New Perspective*, which featured the work of CGO faculty. We thank Jodi DeLibertis for her substantial work on a first draft of this document and Tara Hudson for editorial insights.

² Holvino, E. 2001. *Complicating gender: The simultaneity of race, gender, and class in organization change(ing)*. CGO Working Paper #14. Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management.

³ Jackson, B. & Holvino, E. 1997. Developing Multicultural Organizations. In Abramms, B. & Simons, G.F. *The Cultural Diversity Sourcebook: Getting Real About Diversity*. Amherst, MA: Human Resource Development Press; Chesler, M. 1994. Organization Development is Not the Same As Multicultural Organization Development. In E.Y. Cross, J.H. Katz, F.A. Miller, & E.W. Seashore (Eds.), *The Promise of Diversity*. Burr Ridge, IL: Irwin. 240-251; Miller, F. & Katz, J. 1995. Cultural Diversity as a Developmental Process: The Path from Monocultural Club to Inclusive Organization. In J. Pfeiffer, *The 1995 Annual: Volume 2, Consulting*. San Diego, CA: Pfeiffer & Co. 267-281.

- ⁴ See Holvino, E. 2003. You are the CEO: Which diversity intervention strategy will work for your organization? *The Diversity Factor*. Fall; and also responses in the Winter 2004 issue.
- ⁵ McCracken, D. 2000. Winning the talent war for women: Sometimes it takes a revolution. *Harvard Business Review*. 78(6), 159-165.
- ⁶ Caiazza, A., Shaw, P., & Werschkul, M. 2004. *Women's Economic Status in the States: Wide Disparities by Race, Ethnicity, and Region*. Institute for Women's Policy Research, Washington, DC; Catalyst. 2003. *Advancing Latinas in the Workplace: What Managers Need to Know*. New York, NY: Catalyst.
- ⁷ See for example, Kolb, D., et al. 1998. *CGO Insights #1, Making change: A framework for promoting gender equity in organizations*. Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management; Fletcher, J. & Merrill-Sands, M. 1998. *CGO Insights #2, Looking below the surface: The gendered nature of organizations*. Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management; Ely, R.E. & Meyerson, D.E. 2000. *Theories of gender in organizations: A new approach to organizational analysis and change*. CGO Working Paper #8. Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management.
- ⁸ Holvino, E. 2003. Theories of Differences: Changing Paradigms for Organizations. In D.L. Plummer (Ed.), *Handbook of Diversity Management: Beyond Awareness to Competency Based Learning*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America. 111-132; Kirkham, K. 1996. Managing In a Diverse Workforce: From Incident to "Ism." In E. Cross & M. Blackburn White, *The Diversity Factor: Capturing the Competitive Advantage of a Changing Workforce*. Chicago: Irwin Professional. 24-46.
- ⁹ Kochan, T., et al. 2002. *The Effects of Diversity on Business Performance: Report of the Diversity Research Network*. 31. Available at www.shrm.org/foundation/kochan_keyfindings.asp. See also Giscombe, K. & Mattis, M. 2002. Leveling the playing field for women of color in corporate management: Is the business case enough? *Journal of Business Ethics*, 37(1), 103-119. They argue that tying diversity strategies to business goals does not address individual resistance, which is needed if real attitude change is going to occur among managers to support the advancement of women of color.
- ¹⁰ See for example, Kotter, J. 1995. Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail. *Harvard Business Review*. 73(2), 59-67; Kolb, D. *op. cit.*
- ¹¹ Weisbord, M. & Janoff, S. 2000. *Future Search: An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organizations and Communities*. 2nd edition. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- ¹² Merrill-Sands, D. & Holvino, E. with Cumming, J. 2000. *Working with diversity: A focus on global organizations*. CGO Working Paper #11. Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management.
- ¹³ Gabelnick, F. 2003. Learning seminar on diversity & working across differences. Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations.
- ¹⁴ For more on simultaneity, see Holvino, E. 2001. *op. cit.*
- ¹⁵ See Holvino, E. & Sheridan, B. 2003. *CGO Insights #17, Working across differences: Diversity practices for organizational change*. Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management.
- ¹⁶ For more on the "Failure Theory of Success," see "Commencement Address by Professor Lani Guinier at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, May 16, 2004," at www.uiuc.edu/commencement/guinier.html.
- ¹⁷ Some conditions of this case have been changed to protect confidentiality.
- ¹⁸ Proudford, K. 2002. *CGO Insights #14, Asking the question: Uncovering the assumptions that undermine conversations across race*. Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management.
- ¹⁹ Holvino, E. Forthcoming. *CGO Commentaries #4, Women in organizations: Why our differences matter*. Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management.
- ²⁰ McRae, M. 2004. *CGO Commentaries #2, How do I talk to you, my white sister?* Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management.
- ²¹ Proudford, K. *op. cit.*
- ²² King, M. June 2001. Keynote address at CGO Conference *Working with Our Differences: Chasms, Bridges, Alliances?* A summary of his keynote can be found at www.simmons.edu/som/cgo/working_with_diff.pdf.
- ²³ Debebe, G. 2002. Guest learning and adaptation in the field: A Navajo case study. *Development in Practice*. 12(3&4), 355-369.
- ²⁴ For more on the concept of small wins, see Meyerson, D. *CGO Insights #6, Tempered radicalism: Changing the workplace from within*. Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management.
- ²⁵ Cumming and Holvino use the term "problematic moments" to refer to a similar phenomenon that occurs in multicultural groups. See Cumming J. & Holvino, E. 2003. *CGO Insights #19, Enhancing working across differences with the problematic moment approach*. Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management.
- ²⁶ Thomas, R.R. 1999. *Building a house for diversity: How a fable about a giraffe & elephant offers new strategies for today's workforce*. New York, NY: AMA-COM.
- ²⁷ While the data on diversity and organizational functioning is mixed, Robin Ely & David Thomas argue that using an "integration-and-learning" perspective on diversity can help organizational members achieve sustained benefits from diversity. See Ely, R. & Thomas, D. 2000. *Cultural diversity at work: The moderating effects of work group perspectives on diversity*. CGO Working Paper #10. Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management.

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